

# NEED FOR ACTORS

## Good Plays Easier To Find Than Players

By BROOKS ATKINSON

TAKE, for example, San Francisco. It is a vigorous, cultivated city with a population of about 800,000 people. It is surrounded with universities that include busy departments of the drama. In respect to theatre, it is typical of other American cities.

Touring companies from New York bring San Francisco some Broadway hits, usually with casts inferior to the original. Edwin Lester, who produces for the Coast, supplies a few original productions. "Kismet" was one of his. In another conventional theatre, Randolph Hale puts on Broadway hits, like "Anniversary Waltz" and "The Tunnel of Love," with casts that for the most part are recruited locally.

Incomplete and haphazard as this system is, it probably supplies the needs of the great mass of people who look for pleasant entertainment in the theatre. When it is well done with brilliant actors, everybody is delighted.

But San Francisco is like several other cities in one respect: smaller groups of people are interested in plays of greater artistic or literary distinction. To them the theatre is not so much show business as a form of culture. Probably their attitudes toward the theatre have been formed or influenced by the universities, which for half a century have been graduating thousands of young people who have studied drama, and who know that for more than 2,000 years the drama has shaped and been shaped by the spiritual experience of mankind.

### Production Costs

In New York, which is the liveliest theatregoing city in America, there are thousands of similar theatregoers. Since theatregoing is an integral part of their lives, they are as familiar with the drama of ideas as they are with run-of-the-mine entertainment. In the smaller cities theatregoers with similar tastes are less numerous, and they cannot support full-fledged productions, like "Look Homeward, Angel," which cost huge sums of money to produce and operate. (It should be added that New York can hardly afford them. Of the ten best plays that Louis Kronenberger selected for his 1956-57 Burns Mantle volume, seven were financial failures.)

But in the smaller cities smaller audiences do support small resident theatres that put on plays of literary distinction. The audiences of the resident theatres in Washington, Houston, Los Angeles and San Francisco are thoroughly familiar with the best drama of today and the past. For their theatres not only put on the works of the foremost dramatists of the world; they also produce some difficult plays that New York has not yet attempted. The Actor's Workshop in San Francisco has produced Bertolt Brecht's "Mother Courage"—a play that has a formidable reputation abroad. Also in San Francisco, the Playhouse has scheduled Ugo Betti's "The Queen and the Rebels"—an esoteric drama calculated to terrify any honest showman in or out of New York.

Although the literary taste of the resident theatres is admirable, they have difficulty in finding actors sufficiently experienced to match the quality of the plays. It takes more than goodwill and enthusiasm to produce an actor. It takes years of experience devoted to acting. He has to be saturated in acting.

### Talent Pools

During a recent three-week tour of resident theatres it seemed apparent to this theatregoer that the best work is being done in the theatres that at least have access to communities where hundreds of professional actors are available. The high standards of acting at Arena Stage in Washington probably result from the fact that Mrs. Zelda Fichandler recruits many of her actors in New York.

The skill of Mrs. Nina Vance's production of "A Phoenix Too Frequent" at the Alley Theatre in Houston reflects the professional skill of Jeanette Clift and Ernest Graves, who came from New York for the occasion, although Miss Clift began her career in Houston. The controlled exuberance of the "Inherit the Wind" production at the Players' Ring Gallery in Hollywood is derived from the professionalism of a city that is full of actors who know how to extract form from the apparent confusion of a crowd scene. In Dallas the Margo Jones Theatre has always kept in touch with New York for the nucleus of an acting company.

In San Francisco the standards of acting are uneven. The four resident theatres included

in the Bay City Association operate only on week-ends. Even the actors who are paid cannot earn enough to devote their whole time to acting. Some of the actors are excellent. Most of the individual parts are well played in the Playhouse's production of "The Little Foxes" and in the Actor's Workshop production of "A Gift of Fury"; and there is some good individual acting in "Murder in the Cathedral" at the Golden Hind Playbox, and in "A Memory of Two Mondays" by the Inter-players.

But the lack of professionalism results in ragged group performances—slovenly or inaudible speech, unbalanced movement, broken rhythm, uncoordinated tempos. Despite the fact that some of the parts are well played, all the group performances lack the grace and flow of finished work.

Resident theatres are such a normal solution to the needs of individual communities that it is logical to expect them to grow in numbers and influence. They will maintain a discriminating attitude toward the selection of scripts, and they will be the custodians of civilized drama. But the quality of the acting will remain a serious problem for the theatres that do not have easy access to professional talent.

Only large audiences can pay the bills for thoroughly professional companies. But the audiences will not be large until the quality of the acting improves. This is one of the most familiar of the theatre's paradoxes.